



NICK DYER-WITHEFORD 2015-09-12

CYBER-PROLETARIAT: INTERVIEW WITH NICK DYER-WITHEFORD

ECONOFICTION, MASHINES, NONPOLITICS CYBER-PROLETARIAT, NON-ORGANISATION, POLITICS

Gavin Mueller: Your 1999 book *Cyber-Marx* is an excellent summary of autonomist Marxism and post-operaismo as well as an argument for its relevance for struggles against a capitalism increasingly suffused with information and communication technology. With *Cyber-Proletariat*, you are less sanguine about post-operaismo's embrace of cybernetic technologies. Can you explain your shift in position? What has made information and communication technology appear as a bigger threat for the global working class?

Nick Dyer-Witheford: My change in position reflects involvement in two moments of struggle – that of alter-globalization from the late 1990s through the early 2000s; and then, from 2008 on, the new social antagonisms and struggles that emerge in the wake of the financial meltdown. Both struggles have revealed new possibilities and new problems for anti-capitalist movements attempting to use cybernetic technologies. On the one hand, there was the evident and much-discussed use of social media and cell phone networks in what we might call the 2011 revolts – the riots, the strikes, the occupations. At the same time, and on the other hand, all those events reveal the difficulties that can attend using those technologies as an organizational matrix—for example, what we can call the “up like a rocket, down like a stick” syndrome that characterized some of the 2011 movements. Also during that cycle, and particularly coming with the Snowden revelations in North America, was revealed the scope and intensity of the surveillance to which militants are likely to be subjected within the cybernetic milieu.

Underlying those points – which we might call *tactical* points about the usage of cybernetic technologies by revolutionary movements – is another larger, more *strategic* point: the changes in class composition which have been effected by capital in terms of its restructuring of the global workforce using automata and networks and, in the financial system, networks of automata. *Cyber-Proletariat* starts with the question of the validity and significance of the “Facebook revolution” trope, but then moves from that into an attempt at analysis of the deeper effect of cybernetics on the restructuring of labor within advanced capitalism.

GM: That brings me to my next question. This is primarily a book about class composition in the 21st century. Almost every chapter is a weaving of the various forms of labor making up the global supply chains of cybernetic objects such as cell

phones and social media sites – miners in the Amazon, content moderators in the Philippines, app developers in San Francisco. Are there potentials for such far-flung varieties of labor, “internally striated and fractioned,” as you put it, to unite politically? Can there be shared interests with such divergences in “subjectivity” – a word you use several times – among these workers?

NDW: The path of global class restructuring that capital has taken over the past 40 years has been one of intensified differentiation and inequality. This has taken a form of the bifurcation of the labor force between upwardly mobile sector of professionals, and on the other hand, a vast sea of insecure, precarious low-wage proletarianized labor. This has been a striking split within what was formerly conceived of – even if somewhat mythically – as the potential solidarity of the industrial mass labor force. This a split is now also intensified by its distribution across the multiple wage zones traversed by the supply chains of global capital. At the same time, while there are growing inequalities between these two strata – the professional intermediate classes and the proletarianized labor forces – the even greater inequality is, of course, between plutocratic capital and both those segments.

Hence, there are simultaneously issues of real antagonism between these different fractions of capital's labor, but also possibilities for forms of cooperation. All the more so because what we are seeing emerge increasingly is a range of various re-proletarianizations of the professional strata – all too visible within the university setting, in which people with aspirations towards professional careers find themselves trapped in the ghettos of precarious work; the famous situation of the graduate student without a future, cited by Paul Mason as a critical dynamic in 2011.

So what we saw during the 2011 cycle was the surfacing both of the potential alliances and the potential antagonisms within this global labor force. There were undoubtedly points in the great occupations, such as Tahrir Square, where the mobilization created large solidarities of different strata against a kleptocratic authoritarian regime. In other places, like Britain in 2011, one saw strands of struggle running parallel but without meeting. You have the eruption of powerful campus revolts among students, and then riots in the cities amongst the most excluded and dispossessed sectors. Both have strong resonances as protests against austerity regimes, but also exist almost in worlds apart, and sometimes with great suspicion and hostility between them. And then in yet other settings one sees situations in which some of the tactics of the 2011 occupations are adopted by middle class strata struggling to preserve elements of their privilege, for example in Thailand and Venezuela.

This is a long way of saying that we're looking at an extraordinarily contradictory set of class formations that pose very serious organizational questions for communist-oriented movements, questions which I do not think were successfully answered in the 2011 movements, although those movements have posed the questions in the most acute form.

GM: You temper some of your previous work in autonomist Marxist theory with an engagement with communization theory as presented in journals such as *Tiqqun*, *SIC*, and *Endnotes*. How does this body of work supplement or modify autonomist theory?

NDW: Autonomism and communization theory are undoubtedly the most interesting strands of communist movement theorization today and are largely critical of each other. Autonomism emphasizes workers' antagonism to capital. Communization theory insists that we must understand that workers are also part of capital. Autonomism has always emphasized and celebrated the circulation of struggles amongst different groups of workers. Communization theory reminds us that, as we were just discussing, these segments of the working class can often be antagonistic to each other.

I'll say that both these strands of theory have their characteristic problems. Autonomism is chronically optimistic, always keen to see one swallow making a spring. Communization theory has a very studied melancholia. In some way, this book is an attempt to set in play a conversation that I found myself having intellectually in my reading, a conversation between these twin faces of ultra-leftism in order to see what emerged from that.

GM: Could you say a bit more about how you see this melancholia as a weakness of communization theory?

NDW: The element in communization theory that I'm most critical of is actually one that it shares to some degree with autonomism: its rejection of what it calls programmatism and its scrupulous refusal to describe any path to a communist situation short of the immediate abolition of the commodity form. I believe that it is extremely difficult to persuade people, including oneself, to embark on the time-consuming, demanding, and, in crisis situations, dangerous task of attempting to create a new society without having any provisional ideas of what that path might look like.

Indeed, I would say that what we saw recently in Greece, which can be taken on the one hand as a failure of classic social democratic electoral strategies, also really seriously shows the problems that can arise when there is a rejection of any attempt to think transitionally about various stages and phases in the movement of anti-capitalist struggle. So I don't completely buy that part of communization theory, where participants whose work I otherwise I admire, rather exempt themselves from doing some hard work.

I'm much more sympathetic on that front to groups like Plan C in the United Kingdom, who recognize that we do need to collectively as a movement think about issues of transition, but in a non-dogmatic and explorative way that will have to admit the

huge degree of uncertainty that would attend any crisis which could result in major transformations.

GM: It has become somewhat common for rising precarity and technological unemployment to be viewed in a somewhat positive light. Most recently British journalist Paul Mason wrote a long essay in The Guardian predicting that a post-work, post-capitalist future is being created before our eyes. In a different vein, accelerationist theory embraces advancing subsumption of social relations to capitalism and its technologies. How does your work respond to these kinds of arguments?

NDW: They point to a reality which many other radical thinkers have pointed to: it's clear that capitalism is creating potentials – not just technological, but organizational potentials – which could be adapted in a transformed manner to create a very different type of society. The evident example is the huge possibilities for freeing up time by automation of certain types of work. For me, the problem both with Paul's work, which I respect, and with the accelerationists, is there is a failure to acknowledge that the passage from the potential to the actualization of such communist possibilities involves crossing what William Morris describes as a "river of fire." I don't find in their work a great deal about that river of fire. I think it would be reasonable to assume there would be a period of massive and protracted social crisis that would attend the emergence of these new forms. And as we know from historical attempts in the 20th Century to cross that river of fire, a lot depends on what happens during that passage. So there is, if one could put it that way, a certain *automatism* about the prediction of the realization of a new order in both these schools, which we should be very careful about.

GM: Your final chapter discusses the organization of proletarian struggles. These struggles, you argue, must adapt themselves to wartime, to this evocative metaphor of the river of fire. You also envision a networked, rather than hierarchical, form of organization. Can you say more about the future of organization? Are there examples of these kinds of emergent forms you can point to?

NDW: You've named some of the provocations I suggest in terms of thinking about new organizational forms, provocations elicited by the dilemmas of the 2011 struggles. Amongst these, one that I put very close to the top of the list is the need for the emergence of new forms of labor organization, which can take better account of the realities of precarious work and unemployment. These are already under way in a variety of forms, both in attempts – and here I'll speak from my Canadian vantage point – I'm aware of some major trades unions which, if only for reasons of self-preservation, are attempting to open themselves more to the precarity of increasing numbers of their members. But there are also initiatives coming from outside the established trades unions, from precarious workers themselves, to find new forms. So, first, there is a huge challenge around workplace – or unplaced work – organization.

The second thing I suggest is the need for a reassessment of digital organizing tactics: a clearer recognition of the necessity of such organizing, because we do live in a form of capitalism in which social life has become cybernetically subsumed, but also for an appreciation of the limitations and risks of those forms of organization.

I also suggest that this seems to be a moment to think very seriously about new organizational syntheses that could overcome the verticalist-horizontalist split, which of course is a centuries-long division, but now seems particularly necessary to get beyond. Without getting all bubbly about things, I'm encouraged by what I see in terms of experiments with various forms of common front organizations, some of which are active here in Ontario, which are bringing together in tentative, provisional, and experimental ways, people from the Occupy movement, labor movement, and a range of other social movements.

We've already mentioned a fourth point, the importance of developing a new non-dogmatic approach to envisaging what one could frankly call transitional strategies – Plan Cs. The fifth, final point, which really is what you started with, wartime, is simply a suggestion there is a need to be better prepared for truly major crises and for the sorts of risks and openings that these entail. My observation is that, certainly within North America, what calls itself "the left" was taken completely by surprise by what happened in 2008. We had a massive crisis of capital. But organizationally, largely due to the wear-down by neoliberalization, there was a real inability to seize the historical moment. It seems highly likely that there will be further historical moments of crisis, possibly soon. There's a lot to be learned from the experiences of comrades in such places as Syria, Turkey, Ukraine: places where, insofar as progressive organizations can even still function in the polarizing fatalities of civil war situations, they have to come to grips in a digital environment with issues of potentially fatal surveillance, encryption, verification, authentication in order to operate in these very extreme circumstances. I think we need to think very seriously about that, and prepare seriously.

GM: I hasten to add that, while our conversation has been quite theoretical, your book is a wonderful catalog of a variety of struggles, and packed with empirical details that are of interest to anyone who has been following or participating in struggles, especially since 2008.

NDW: The book is an attempt to sort out some of these struggles and dilemmas that have arisen particularly over the past seven years, and more broadly over the past 15 years, from the position of an academic participant in some of the events that I'm describing. It's a book that's very much in motion, and it wears its contradictions on its sleeves, because we need to be able to talk about contradictions and conflicts within the movement in order to be able to move past what, for the moment, seems like an impasse.

Nick Dyer-Witheford is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario. He is the author of *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High Technology Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1999) and *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

Gavin Mueller is a graduate student in Washington, DC.

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